



Highlights of [GAO-07-584](#), a report to the Chairman, Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

The Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration (FMCSA) has the primary federal responsibility for reducing crashes involving large trucks and buses. FMCSA uses its “SafeStat” tool to target carriers for reviews of their compliance with the agency’s safety regulations based on their crash rates and safety violations.

As requested, this study reports on (1) the extent to which FMCSA’s policy for prioritizing compliance reviews targets carriers with a high risk of crashes, (2) how FMCSA ensures compliance reviews are thorough and consistent, and (3) the extent to which FMCSA follows up with carriers with serious safety violations. To complete this work, GAO reviewed FMCSA’s regulations, policies, and safety data and contacted FMCSA officials in headquarters and nine field offices.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making several recommendations, including that FMCSA (1) select certain high-risk carriers in the accident safety evaluation area for compliance reviews and (2) revise its policy for assessing maximum fines. The Department of Transportation said that it would assess the efficacy of the first recommendation, but it did not comment on the other recommendations.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-07-584.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Susan A. Fleming at (202) 512-2834 or flemings@gao.gov.

MOTOR CARRIER SAFETY

Federal Safety Agency Identifies Many High-Risk Carriers but Does Not Assess Maximum Fines as Often as Required by Law

What GAO Found

By and large, FMCSA does a good job of identifying carriers that pose high crash risks for subsequent compliance reviews, ensuring the thoroughness and consistency of those reviews, and following up with high-risk carriers.

FMCSA’s policy for prioritizing compliance reviews targets many high-risk carriers but not other higher risk ones. Carriers must score among the worst 25 percent of carriers in at least two of SafeStat’s four evaluation areas (accident, driver, vehicle, and safety management) to receive high priority for a compliance review. Using data from 2004, GAO found that 492 carriers that performed very poorly in only the accident evaluation area (i.e., those carriers that scored among the worst 5 percent of carriers in this area) subsequently had an aggregate crash rate that was more than twice as high as that of the 4,989 carriers to which FMCSA gave high priority. FMCSA told GAO that the agency plans to assess whether giving high priority to carriers that perform very poorly in only the accident evaluation area would be an effective use of its resources.

FMCSA promotes thoroughness and consistency in its compliance reviews through its management processes, which meet GAO’s standards for internal controls. For example, FMCSA uses an electronic manual to record and communicate its compliance review policies and procedures and teaches proper compliance review procedures through both classroom and on-the-job training. Furthermore, its investigators use an information system to document their compliance reviews, and its managers review these data, helping to ensure thoroughness and consistency between investigators. For the most part, FMCSA and state investigators cover the nine major applicable areas of the safety regulations (e.g., driver qualifications and vehicle condition) in 95 percent or more of compliance reviews, demonstrating thoroughness and consistency.

FMCSA follows up with many carriers with serious safety violations, but it does not assess maximum fines against all of the serious violators that GAO believes the law requires. FMCSA followed up with more than 99 percent of the 1,196 carriers that received proposed unsatisfactory safety ratings from compliance reviews completed in fiscal year 2005, finding that 881 of these carriers made safety improvements and placing 309 others out of service. However, GAO found that FMCSA (1) does not assess maximum fines against carriers with a pattern of varied serious violations as GAO believes the law requires and (2) assesses maximum fines against carriers for the third instance of a violation, whereas GAO reads the statute as requiring FMCSA to assess the maximum fine for the second.